DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 320 872 SP 032 395

AUTHOR Diessner, Rhett; And Others
TITLE Curriculum for a Democratic School.
PUB DATE Apr 90
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Boston, MA, April 17-20, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cooperative Learning; *Curriculum Development; *Democratic Values; Elementary Education; Hidden Curriculum; Parent School Relationship; *Participative Decision Making; Peer Teaching; *Policy Formation; Student Participation; Teacher Administrator Relationship; Tutoring

ABSTRACT

At Orchards Elementary School (Idaho), curriculum inquiry is focusing on the nature of a democratic school. As democracy is more of a process than a specific content, the Orchards faculty have concentrated more on changes in methods of delivering curriculum than on changing specific items of curriculum. Questions of worth and value have all circulated around the concept of "shared decision making," which is the central ideal of the multifaceted restructuring efforts that have occurred during Orchards' involvement in the Mastery in Learning Project. From initial focus on faculty autonomy/decison making and student discipline, the faculty is moving towards democracy and shared decision making within their classrooms, involving students in curriculum decisions, playground arbitration, and other aspects of their school lives. (Author)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED320872

Curriculum for a Democratic School

prepared for the AERA symposium:

School Renewal Through Curriculum Development:
Revisiting Questions of Worth

Rhett Diessner
Lewis-Clark State College
and
The Faculty of Orchards Elementary School
Lewiston, Idaho

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

R. Diessner

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Running head: Democratic curriculum

SP 032 395

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Abstract

At Orchards Elementary School curriculum inquiry is focusing on the nature of a democratic school. As democracy is more of a process than a specific content, the Orchards faculty have concentrated more on changes in methods of delivering curriculum than on changing specific items of curriculum. Questions of worth and value have all circulated around the concept of "shared decision making", which is the central ideal of the multi-faceted restructuring efforts that have occurred during Orchards involvement in the Mastery in Learning Project. From initial focus on faculty autonomy/decision making and student discipline, the faculty is moving towards democracy and shared decision making within their classrooms, involving students in curriculum decisions, playground arbitration, and other aspects of their school lives.

Curriculum for a Democratic School

Shared-decision making, or grassroots democratic process, has been the guiding theme of Orchards Elementary School's restructuring during the last three and one-half years. As presented at the Partnership's in Education Conference, a gathering of over 1000 Idaho educators, in Fall 1989. Orchards faculty perceives multi-levels of hierarchic and collateral shared decision making. This is most visible in the four main action committees developed at Orchards since the beginning of the Mastery in Learning Project: A Teacher-to-Administrator committee, a Teacher-to-Community/Parent committee, a Teacher-to-Teacher committee, and a Teacher-to-Student committee. Additionally, a Steering Committee, made up of representatives from each of the four committees and the building principal, guides the restructuring and development of the school (see appendix A for the Orchards Statement of Shared Decision Making).

In a traditional manner, curriculum development is usually thought of as a content decision, i.e., what "facts" should be taught in what "subject". The curriculum decisions that Orchards has focused upon, however, impact two other critical areas: (a) the process or method of making and imparting curriculum, and (b) the hidden curriculum. In this sense, rather than teaching "about" democracy, Orchards faculty have emphasized curriculum methods that create democratic citizens through <u>participation</u> in shared-decision making. This includes important areas of life that are often part of a schools "hidden curriculum", rather than overt objectives. Examples of the hidden curriculum include how to resolve conflict between students, how to resolve discipline

problems between students and teachers, and how students can help each other learn.

Processes and accomplishments of curriculum development at Orchards

In the beginning of the Mastery in Learning Project at Orchards elementary school, the teachers, administrators, parents, and students were involved in setting goals based on a needs assessment. The Faculty Inventory, an instrument provided by the NEA, was itself a democratic process, in that each teacher was voting for the most important areas of development for the school. The results of this assessment showed that what teacher's greatly valued was the improvement of discipline in and out of the classroom. One of the greatest successes of the Orchards faculty Teacher-to-Student committee was the conflict manager system developed for mediating disputes on the playground. The primary goal of this system was for conflict managers to assist other students in the peaceful expression and early resolution of conflicts on the playground. Conflict managers are selected through a shared process of nomination and election by students and confirmation by teachers. The conflict managers wear red smocks on the playground and only get involved in a difficulty if three criteria are met; (a) it is a non-physical dispute, (b) the students involved in the dispute agree to be helped by the conflict managers, and (c) the disputants agree to solve the problem.

The entire classroom receives instruction by their teacher on the role of conflict managers, the goal of peaceful resolution, how to share feelings, and cooperation. This instruction meets

curricular goals of the health program, such as "understanding feelings" and "positive action"; the social studies program, such as how people can solve conflict non-violently; and the citizenship program. Orchards teachers' report that since this program began many students have appeared to become active problem solvers of real problems, they have assumed more responsibility for their own actions, and they have found more positive ways of meeting their own social needs. Parents have reported to teachers that the effects have spilled over into the family and have helped their children solve problems among themselves more effectively. Teachers have noticed that students who have been selected to be conflict managers have improved their leadership skills, appear to have an increased their self-esteem, and express more often a belief that they can be of benefit to others. It is hoped that by learning how to negotiate conflict at school that these students will generalize this ability into others settings and to their future lives.

Another area in which the Teacher-to-Student committee is struggling to make a democratic difference in citizenship and the hidden curriculum is with misbehavior and discipline problems in the classroom, hallways, lunchroom as well as the playground. To form a firm basis, this committee worked to develop an Orchards School Constitution, which had administrator, teacher, student, and parent involvement in its creation. It includes a Bill of Rights which lists the rights and responsibilities of students, teachers, administrators, and parents. Through group decision-making the teachers found the democratic ideal of self-regulation to be of greatest worth: "A unique feature of this plan is that it

is based upon self-regulation, which is the ability to control oneself."

This search for democratic discipline methods led the teachers to request in-service and college courses that emphasized the logical consequences methods of Dreikurs (Dreikurs & Grey, 1968; Dreikurs & Cassels, 1974; Dreikurs, Grunwald, & Pepper; 1982), and the just community methods of Kohlberg (Murphy, 1988; Powers, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989; Reimer, Paolitto, & Hersh, 1983). Application of logical consequences and just community involves students in setting their own limits and benefits as is appropriate to their maturity level. The more mature the students, the more power the teacher shares with them. Although discipline is not always considered a curricular issue, what is more important than the objectives of teaching our students self-regulation, fairness, and respect for others? Based on their initial exposure to this work and attempts to institute it in the classrooms, the teachers have designed their own Spring 1990 college course which will focus on eight objectives, that will become the eight chapters of the Orchards Manual on Democratic Discipline:

1. Introduction and Philosophy for Democratic Discipline
2. Consistency in Terms and Vocabulary Across Grade Levels
3. Logical Consequences for Misbehavior Across Grade Levels
4. The Effect of Stages of Social Reasoning on Classroom Democracy
5. Disciplinary Tracking: Or how we can help a child for more than a single nine months
6. How to start off the Democratic Year

7. The Role of the "Teach To's"
8. The Use of Teacher Assistance Teams to address students' development.

The Teacher-to-Teacher committee has been working to affect curriculum in two ways. One, they organized the grade-to-grade meetings in which teachers get together to integrate curriculum content and method. The curricular methods that worked for specific children and the curricular content that was mastered and the content that wasn't mastered are the topics of discussion in these meetings. Respect for students' learning is the focus in the grade-to-grade meetings; the teachers in the upcoming year take the responsibility to include the objectives that weren't mastered the year before, and delete objectives for students who have already mastered them.

A second impact of the Teacher-to-Teacher committee has been sensitizing teachers to differing learning styles to influence curricular methods. Many Orchards teachers have attended Rita Dunn's workshops on assessing and teaching to differing learning styles (Dunn, 1984). The teachers perceive this as an indirect way of involving students in making processional curricular decisions. Once the student and teacher understand the student's preferred learning style, they are in a position to adapt curriculum content to that style. Looking toward "worth", teachers frame this approach as being child-centered; teaching for the needs of the child, rather than the convenience of the teacher. The teachers themselves wrote a grant proposal and consequently received district funds to acquire the Learning Styles Inventory and have begun assessing their students with this

instrument with the goal of operationalizing the results.

Another teacher led restructuring movement at Orchards has been cooperative learning. This seems to have stemmed from one moral and one strategic value that many teachers at Orchards share. The moral value is that students should learn to help each other. The strategic value is that students may master the pre-set district objectives better when learning cooperatively. Cooperative learning has taken two tracks -- one intra-class and the other inter-class. The intra-class level arranges the students into two pairs of partners joined to make learning teams of four members each. Partners and teams are changed every 6 weeks. The teams and partners take an active role in deciding what methods they will use to meet learning objectives. The students make use of a highly organized system of tracking their accomplishments and they receive various awards for point totals that indicate mastery.

Inter-class cooperation has taken the form of a whole class of older students getting together with a lower level class and tutoring them. For example, 4th graders help 1st graders on a weekly basis in both language arts and computer skills and 5th graders help the 2nd graders on a weekly basis in reading and math. Teachers were quick to point out that learning occurs both directions, i.e., the older students remember facts and concepts they had forgotten and the younger students learn new information in a highly responsive situation. Both students learn how to receive and give help in the experience.

The Teacher-to-Administrator committee has trained faculty in the use of computer hardware and software (PSInet), provided by

IBM and NEA, that allows an easy linkage with the 26 other schools involved in the Mastery in Learning Project's school restructuring. Being involved in this computer network allows sharing of curriculum content and methods among schools quickly and is being increasingly utilized by Orchards faculty. PSInet has also been a stimulus to encourage the dialogue of questioning, such as, "What has worked at your school?" "Do you teach keyboarding? At what grade level?" "What discipline system has been effective in your school? Does it have a data base?"

The Orchards faculty and the Teacher-to-Administrator committee have been instrumental in the district specific Criterion Referenced Testing (CRT) program. The use of CRTs is more democratic than using nationally normed standardized testing as it is specifically sensitive to the district's curriculum objectives. When the CRT program was being planned several years ago, the Orchards faculty expressed their concern over the creation of the tests. Since that time teachers throughout the district, including many from Orchards, have been members of the committees that are developing the specific items upon which the students in the district will be examined for mastery.

<u>The roles of teacher and student in the curriculum development process and the dilemmas therein</u>

In preparation for this paper a sample of teachers across grade levels at Orchards were given both a semi-structured interview concerning curriculum issues (N = 4; see appendix B) and a survey concerning their priorities in the shared decision-making process of curriculum development (N = 7; see appendix C). There was full consensus that students, at a minimum, <u>indirectly</u> drive

the curriculum. As one teacher put it, "Students effect the curriculum totally by their ability level. You have to judge each student and each new class on whether they could master the objectives or not."

Likewise, all the teachers agreed that students should have choices in the methods and procedures which they use to meet objectives. They thought that primary grade students "should have some choice in how to meet objectives and goals...[we should give] students multiple choices of methods of learning the objectives. This can be accomplished through learning centers and with careful guidance by the teacher. But if a student bombs on their choices, the teacher needs to take a more direct approach." At the intermediate grades teachers expressed that "we should set the structure and the students can make choices within that." "Students should have a say, because they will be more interested, but they need to be guided." "They learn what they want to anyway. They need for us to show them why it is necessary for them to learn certain things."

When it comes to specific curricular content the teachers are more cautious and recognize a basic dilemma. "Students aren't ready in the 4th grade to decide whether they want to learn division or not....[although they need] to have a say". One teacher captured the feeling that I have heard echoed throughout many school districts in many parts of America, i.e., "We don't have a handle on how kids <u>should</u> effect curriculum. We don't know how to include them. We don't know how to ask them for help." Clearly "students <u>should</u> have some choice, but they don't know what they need to know. They have choices in how to meet

objectives, but we can't have the curriculum run by the students."

In summary, based on teachers' value of shared-decision-making, they encourage students to find their own style and make their own decisions about many ways of meeting pre-set curricular objectives. But based on the teachers' value of "knowledge", they believe that the immature of the human species will not choose, often enough, to learn the culturally empowering and enabling knowledge without the direct guidance of the teacher. Likewise, based on the worthiness of "fairness", they believe that if the students aren't guided through certain specific content, they will be retarded as citizens in a society in which specific information is a crucial factor in both the workplace and the governmental democratic process.

A similar struggle is found in the teachers' approach to democratic discipline. How much power in disciplinary and rule setting action should be shared and how much should be retained by the teacher? One approach that the teachers have been considering is differential classroom democratic structures based on social-cognitive stages extrapolated from Kohlberg's work on the "just community" (Kohlberg, 1984; Murphy, 1988; Reimer, Paolitto, & Hersh, 1983; Powers, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). What forms of democracy are appropriate for first, third or sixth grade classrooms?

The curriculum input survey that the Orchards teachers completed had a Likert rating scale that used four choices for rating the importance of the different constituents of the curriculum process: 1) not important; 2) somewhat important; 3) important; and 4) very important. The survey also had a hierarchy

scale, in which the teachers rated constituents in order of importance (see appendix C). The results of the survey, which was completed by 54% of the regular education teachers, showed that all but one teacher thought that the teachers' input was "very important". All of the participants rated the teachers' power over the curriculum as the most important of all constituents. As for student input, most teachers rated it "important", one rated it not important, two rated it somewhat important, and none thought it to be "very important". On the hierarchic scale teachers' ordering of the importance of student input ranged from second most important to least important.

Generally, in asking "who owns the curriculum in a democratic society", the Orchards faculty agree with Della-Dora (1976) that the teachers, parents, students, central office and administrators, local school board and governmental agencies need to work together in making curriculum decisions. All these sources have legitimate claims to input that will affect the future generations, and shared decision making in an atmosphere of respect is the key to serving the students' and society's best interests.

Involvement of parents, however, brings up the same concerns as involving students. The dilemma is between the parents having a very important stake in what their children learn, but lacking the expertise to give adequately informed opinion. The teachers agree that "parents should be on curriculum committees and take surveys to give input on what is important", "but they should not have the final word--they don't have the education to decide what curriculum is needed". "Parents should have a say, but they

[often] don't have the educational background. Teachers have gone to college in education. I wouldn't tell an accountant how to do his job. If we could tell parents what kind of help we need, they might help. Input from them is great, but do they have the background? We should work on educating the parents to be helpful in curriculum decisions, and they could be very supportive." "Parents should have input into curriculum--but ideally curriculum needs to be based on research of what children need". Parents are encouraged to be involved at Orchards, and share input on many committees.

Another important dilemma concerning empowering teachers to have some margin of control over the curricular objectives was succinctly stated by one Orchards teacher: "if they [administrators] give us more power over the curriculum, but not more time to work on it we will give it up!" If the educational innovators call for participatory management (Herrick, 1985; Lumley, 1979), if they call for the lengthy time that real consensual democratic decisions take (Mortenson, 1988), if they call for restructuring the "hidden curriculum" to really meet the democratic ideal of "equal opportunity" for all (Wilcox, 1982), if we expect teachers to be more than high-level technicians, to be "transformative intellectuals" (Giroux, 1985; Smithson, 1983), and we expect them to do that while maintaining a full day of contact hours with their students, we are setting them, and our society, up for failure. It is humanly impossible for an elementary teacher to have a family, be involved in a community, have a modicum of recreation, AND be on committees that restructure education and curricula, AND perform action research in their

classroom, AND stay abreast of research in educational journals and conferences to increase their skills, AND teach a full day. This brings up a great question of worth that is facing the American public. If we want our society to improve, or perhaps even survive, we must collectively allocate the quantity and quality of resources into the one arena that can do that -- public education.

This paper will end on a note that teachers at Orchards urged to be included in this paper. The democratic skills of shared decision making which they have gained and are still gaining, through their own learning in the Mastery in Learning Project, have given them both the confidence to forge ahead with their own ideas, and the communicative skills to resolve differences and explain themselves to peers, parents, students and administrators. In the long run, modeling this before students may be the most powerful curricular change.

References

Della-Dora, D. (1976). Democracy and education: Who owns the curriculum? Educational Leadership, 34, 51-59.

Dreikurs, R., & Grey, L. (1968). Logical consequences. New York: Meredith Press.

Dreikurs, R., & Cassels, P. (1974). Discipline without tears, 2nd ed. New York: Hawthorne.

Dreikurs, R., Grunwald, B. B., & Pepper, F. C. (1982). Maintaining sanity in the classroom, 2nd ed. New York: Harper & Row.

Dunn, R. (1984). Learning style: State of the science. Theory into Practice, 23, 10-19.

Giroux, H.A. (1985). Teachers as transformative intellectuals. Social Education, 49, 376-379.

Herrick, N.Q. (1985). Is the time finally ripe for educational democracy? Social Policy, 16, 53-56.

Kohlberg, L. (1984). The psychology of moral development. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Lumley, D. D. (1979). Participation in educational decision making. Educational Horizons, 57, 123-125.

Mortenson, A. (1988). The primary school, the future, and democracy. Western European Education, 20, 73-87.

Murphy, D. F. (1988). The just community at Birch Meadow Elementary School. Phi Delta Kappan, 427-428.

Powers, C., Higgins, A., & Kohlberg, L. (1989). Moral education, community and justice. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Reimer, J., Paolitto, D. P., & Hersh, R. (1983). Promoting moral growth, 2nd ed. New York: Longman.

Smithson, A. (1983). Philosophic competence, educational policy, and the technocratic threat to democracy. Journal of Philosophy of Education, 17, 275-284.

Wilcox, K. (1982). Differential socialization in the classroom: Implications for equal opportunity. In G. Spindler (Ed.), Doing the ethnography of schooling. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

A Statement on Shared Decision Making

From the Orchards Elementary School

This statement was drafted by the consultant to the NEA Mastery in Learning Project (MILP) site, Orchards Elementary School, following discussions in the Steering Committee on two topics: how 'should' shared decision making (SDM) take place in an elementary school, and how 'does' it currently take place at Orchards. The statement has been adopted by the Orchards Steering Committee as policy.

Making decisions together is a major factor in MILP and in restructuring schools. Consulting between levels of hierarchy is a form of democracy in action. In local school districts four hierarchic levels are manifest: 1) students, 2) teachers, 3) principals, 4) superintendent/central office. Democracy (and shared decision making) can only have an impact if members of a community care about each other, and give each other equal respect. Caring is usually demonstrated by a concern with each other's feelings; respect is shown by inquiring about each other's opinions on important matters, even when those opinions differ. However, equal respect does not mean equal power in a democracy. Teachers' power isn't equal to students', and a principal's power isn't the same as teachers'. It does mean that we have to still care about people's feelings who don't ask our opinion; and that we have to invite others opinions, even when we aren't sure they care about us at the moment.

Shared decision making should happen throughout all hierarchic levels. Teachers should allow their students to make some real decisions as a group; the younger the students, the more

power the teacher keeps; the older the students, the more power the teacher shares. As has been demonstrated in MiLP, shared decision making can occur among principals and teachers; it can also occur between parents and the schools, and between superintendents and principals.

Currently, at Orchards, democracy has taken on a form that could be stylized as president-senate-committee. The major forum for shared decision making takes place in the Steering Committee, which acts like a senate. The principal maintains both a status as president of the senate (in which he retains a full veto power of decisions made), and member of the senate, in which he has one equal voice with the other Steering Committee members. A major factor of restructuring, and shared decision making, is that issues of concern to any teacher-member of our community may be made public in one of two appropriate forums. These two forums are described in the next two paragraphs.

First, if the issue relates to one of the listed goals of our Four Committees (Teacher-Teacher, Teacher-Community, Teacher-Administrator, Teacher-Student), the issue should be taken directly to that Committee. Then, that committee will share decision making in deciding what to do with the recommendation. It could drop it, modify it, and/or send it to the Steering Committee.

Second, if the issue doesn't relate to a Committee goal, it should be written on the list of items for the general faculty meeting. In that meeting another form of shared decision making takes place, in which the faculty group has several options, including: dropping the question, making an action decision about

the issue, passing it to a committee in original or modified form, or sending it to the Steering Committee.

Appendix B

Please consider the following questions in two ways:

To what degree have you been involved in some of the following questions?

In what way would you like to see them implemented?

1. Does the administration allow you to make decisions about the curriculum?

   What decisions have you made? What kind would you like to make?

2. How do your students effect your curriculum decisions?

   What way(s) are your students helping make decisions over their curriculum?

3. In what way should parents (or others) be involved in curriculum decisions?

The basic question is again on Shared Decision Making. Who shares in making decisions about curriculum? Who should share this?

Appendix C

SURVEY FOR CURRICULUM INPUT
Mastery in Learning Project
Orchard's Elementary School and Lewis-Clark State College

Please mark the scale on the right that matches your opinion of the topic on the left. All statements below concern choices of appropriate curriculum.

Not Important = 1; Somewhat Important = 2; Important = 3; Very Important = 4

	1	2	3	4
1. Students having input into the curriculum is	//	//	//	//
2. Teachers having input into the curriculum in their own classroom is	//	//	//	//
3. The principal having input into his/her building's curriculum is	//	//	//	//
4. The district's curriculum director & the central office having input is	//	//	//	//
5. The local school board having curriculum input is	//	//	//	//
6. The LEA having curriculum input is	//	//	//	//
7. Direct vote of the parents/populace in a school district to effect curriculum is	//	//	//	//
8. The State Board having curriculum input is	//	//	//	//
9. The SEA having curriculum input is	//	//	//	//
10. The State Legislature effecting curriculum is	//	//	//	//
11. The Federal Congress effecting curriculum is	//	//	//	//
12. The NEA having curriculum input is	//	//	//	//
13. The education department of the United Nations offering local curriculum input is	//	//	//	//

Please order in the level of importance for making curriculum decisions; 1 = most important; 13 = least important:

Students in the class _____
The Teacher of the class _____
The principal _____
The central office _____
The parents/citizens _____
The local school board _____
The LEA _____
The State Board _____
The SEA _____
The State Congress _____
The Federal Congress _____
The NEA _____
The United Nations _____

Please write any comments you have on these topics below, or on the back.